

SKYSCRAPERS

By ALFRED ROMAIN

When we mean "America," we often say "Washington," because this is the official capital of the USA and the site of its government. But in reality the United States has two capitals, the other being New York. New York sets the style and pace for America in practically every field that is not directly connected with the government. New York is the center of American capitalism, the center of American publicity and propaganda, the center of the American fashion industry, the American theater, American music and art.

New York is a unique city, and no single article could possibly do justice to its character. But undoubtedly its most prominent outward feature is the mountain range of its skyscrapers. Looking back on his own experiences, Alfred Romain describes life in and among the skyscrapers.—K.M

SEEN from the top of a skyscraper, people look small, insignificant, very much alike, whether they are street-cleaners, women in fur coats, white-collar workers, beggars, kings, or queens. This applies even to the King of England, as I found out one bright summer morning in 1939 when I looked down from the roof garden of New York's forty-five-story Downtown Athletic Club.

Thousands of other people were gazing down like myself from skyscrapers. On a straight and remarkably empty strip of asphalt below, a small dot, surrounded by even smaller dots, was moving slowly along. The King and Queen of the British Commonwealth of Nations had come to visit the United States of America. Although it was a unique spectacle, with flags waving and bands playing, sensation-hungry New Yorkers were not particularly impressed, nor were they conscious of the fact that history was passing by, flea-sized, forty-five floors below.

The King of England had come to bow before the mighty skyscrapers, smiling modestly, insignificantly. The towering buildings of Battery Place and Wall Street, those money tyrants of gigantic dimensions, stood by unmoved. Was it symbolic?

New Yorkers were not yet thinking much about history and symbolic actions

at that time. Somebody laughed: "Look, even the Nazis have put out their flag," and pointed at a huge German flag which greeted the visiting monarch from the nineteenth floor of the old though still impressive Whitehall Building. Somehow it tickled New Yorkers to see the King pass under the swastika flag.

As soon as the royal visitors were out of sight, life quickly returned to normal. Cars started to move and were soon speeding around the corner of Whitehall again. Thousands of elevators resumed their vertical traffic. People were again rushing in and out of them and returning to their jobs through spacious, well-lit corridors. Typewriters rattled and telephones rang again, and the pretty secretary in front of me was obviously thinking of her lunch date.

Like millions of Americans she would later glance through the papers, hardly noticing the reports about the King's reception in New York and Washington, stopping only to read perhaps that the Roosevelts had offered "hot dogs" to the royal visitors at Hyde Park or that a wreath had been placed on George Washington's tomb in Mount Vernon by the King, whose ancestor George III had spent many years of his life trying to crush the American Revolution.

In those days England and the rest of Europe were still far from the minds

of the skyscraper people. The idea of war, of a conflict which might involve the United States, was remote. "We won't get into it this time," the Americans thought and said. "Why should we bother about dirty European politics? Nobody can solve their troubles anyway," and: "Look what we got out of it last time."

Baseball and golf, next Saturday's party, the motorcar and the joys and sorrows it brought, were paramount in everybody's mind—save for the unemployed. They had other worries.

COMING OUT

Way up in the sky, people were dancing. The big hotel ballroom was crowded with beautifully dressed women and men in tail coats. Mrs. Astor was there and Mr. and Mrs. Pratt of the Standard Oil. The Vanderbilts had come, and there were many other names from the *Social Register*. It was a "coming out" party. A young debutante was being presented to society by her parents, who stood at the head of the reception line, smiling, introducing friends, receiving congratulations. For the girl, the former subdebutante, this was the formal beginning of social life, a life of parties, orchids, dances, lovely clothes. There was music and gaiety. The doors were open onto the roof garden.

The picture that presented itself from there was truly remarkable: a symphony of electric lights, white, red, green, blue, all competing with each other. Thousands and thousands of bright windows. Neon light painting pictures, jumping, running, falling off, and starting all over again. Light from the illuminated skyscraper-tops all the way down to the streaks of cars crowding the streets.

At the foot of the building there was a dark spot. Traffic flowed around it. The skyscrapers had left just enough room for a little square. A small crowd of people, most of them chewing a piece of gum, was listening to a hoarse voice. A few people moved on, others joined the crowd. The speaker was standing on a small stepladder to which he had at-

tached an American flag. He used the word "America" often and with great emphasis. He also said something about the "American way of life" and about "our democratic form of government."

"While we go hungry, four thousand women from Park Avenue spend eighty-five million dollars on dresses and twenty million dollars on jewelry every year," he shouted. Somebody in the audience started to heckle him. "If you don't like it here in this country, why don't you go back where you came from?" A few people laughed. The speaker protested angrily. His family had been in America for generations, he claimed, and with increasing vehemence he cried: "We Americans must make democracy work!"

Then there was a movement in the crowd. A "cop," as policemen are called in New York, pushed his way through. The speaker got off his ladder. A melee of voices, over which rose the cop's Brooklyn accents: "You ain't got no right to soap-box here without no licence." And the hoarse voice of the soap-boxer: "This is a free country!" Then the arguing and talking died down. People dispersed. At the top of the skyscraper the dance music continued.

CITIES IN THE AIR

New York has skyscrapers for every purpose. It has skyscraper office buildings, skyscraper hotels, skyscraper apartment houses, skyscraper jails, skyscraper clubs, skyscraper hospitals, skyscraper department stores, skyscraper factories, skyscraper courthouses, skyscraper universities, and skyscrapers which are cities of their own with a population of 5,000, like one of the buildings on Wall Street, and even with some 25,000 people who work there and 125,000 who visit it every day, like Rockefeller Center in uptown New York. In such cities-within-a-city you can find everything from a shoe-shine and shave to a swimming pool, a movie, or an ice-skating rink. You can get a visa for a foreign country, you can dance, you can breakfast, lunch, or dine in dozens of restaurants according to your taste and purse. Of course you can

work there too—if you have a job; and you must do so at breath-taking speed, because time is worth more money in New York than anywhere else in the world.

In your skyscraper city you can buy everything from a fur coat to an aspirin to chase away the after-effects of the night before. If your case is more serious than that, there is a first-aid station, doctors, or even a hospital waiting for you. If you want to divorce your wife, you just step into the elevator, a couple of floors up, and you are at your lawyer's office, which is impressively furnished and decorated with genuine prints of old New York and the legal profession, to show you that his firm is founded on a venerable tradition.

VERTICAL LIFE

Traffic in your skyscraper city is mostly vertical. Indeed, New York's vertical traffic is bigger than its horizontal one. Every day, elevators carry more people than the subways, motorcars, and busses combined. Every morning you let yourself be tossed up into the sky by one of the forty elevators of your building at fifteen miles an hour, silently except for the hissing and howling of air pressure inside the elevator shaft. You first take an express elevator that races past twenty or thirty stories before making the first stop, gradually reducing its speed like a train entering a station. Then you change into a local that stops tediously at every floor until it finally reaches your own.

In your skyscraper city you do not know the people who are its citizens, and you never bother to get acquainted. It would be hopeless to know the other 4,999 people who work in the same building, just as hopeless as counting its 3,181 windows. You might, of course, get yourself invited to the penthouse that sits on the top of your building like a little mansion. The elevator stops at a private entrance, and as you step out of the lift you enter the atmosphere of a private residence which may not be any different from that of other homes

of the wealthy except for the fact that it is located fifty-seven floors above the ground. Unfortunately, your chances of getting invited into the millionaire's penthouse are rather slim, unless you happen to be a celebrity, a political "big shot," or a millionaire yourself and belong to the *Social Register* class for reasons best known to the editors of that famous volume. The world of the rich is exclusive, very exclusive. And the anonymity of the skyscraper, its vastness and inaccessibility, favor such exclusiveness.

New York's skyscrapers seem particularly huge and magnificent because they stand next to the slums, those endless rows of ugly three-storied buildings, blackened by smoke and neglect, one as hopelessly desolate and depressing as the other. To the street they present a tangle of rusty iron fire escapes where washing is hung up to dry. There is the Bowery, where the "scum of the earth" hangs around, there are the vast slum areas of lower East Side. There is Chinatown, only sadly reminiscent of China's splendor and customs.

Skyscrapers and slums typify the contrast between concentrated wealth and the abject poverty of ill-fed, ill-clothed, and ill-housed masses that, according to President Roosevelt, make up one third of the American people.

THE SKYSCRAPER MIND

When you work and live in a skyscraper, you are far away from the ground. You forget the smell and the feel of the brown earth. But still you have a longing to be out in the open, where trees grow and farmers plow their fields. Deep within you there is a feeling of emptiness and nostalgia. This is why rich business executives have elaborate little roof gardens planted in front of their office windows fifty or sixty floors above the street. But for most people who do not happen to be business executives, this longing for fields and trees remains unsatisfied. And so they gradually give up all hope of getting back to nature and grasp whatever enjoyment and pleasures skyscraper life has to offer.

When you reach that stage, you become part of the skyscraper world. The giants of concrete and steel begin to dominate you, and you begin to enjoy their domination. You become intoxicated with bigness and height, with speed and the thrill of standing on the top of a sixty- or eighty-story building, looking down on the world beneath. You begin to think that skyscrapers represent the biggest and most important things in the world, that they are right because they are big. You get a feeling of superiority that makes you look down on everything that does not have gigantic dimensions. And you end up by assuming that you can judge everything better than the "backward" people of Europe and Asia and that you are entitled to determine their frontiers and forms of government.

You become a creature of the skyscraper and its mentality. You have lost touch with the earth, and you lose touch with your old ideals and traditions. Once your spiritual roots are severed, the skyscraper world quickly completes the process of assimilation.

Like a magic world, the skyline of Manhattan's skyscrapers has greeted most of the immigrants from Europe as their ships entered New York harbor past the Statue of Liberty. It was in the shadow of these giants that they started life in America. They had come from towns and villages where churches are the highest buildings, cathedrals that it had taken generations to build. Now they gazed up the fronts of skyscrapers which hopelessly outdistanced any church they had ever seen. The immigrants started to compare the Old World with the New, and their yardstick was the number of floors of the buildings. They had heard much about the fairy-tale world of America, which had attracted them, though much of it they had not believed. But the first thing they saw in the New World, its skyscrapers, surpassed even their wildest imagination, and after that they accepted the rest of the American myth without reservation. They capitulated before the skyscraper world.

For the immigrants, the American myth was, of course, soon debunked by realities. There were the slums, unemployment, and strikes. Life was drab and impersonal; it was standardization and speed, and it was empty. Even if the magic world of the skyscrapers remained—its glamour was confined to the movies or reserved for the rich. And yet the skyscraper mind continued to dominate those who lived in their shadow. They adopted its mentality, a mentality which has lost touch with nature, tradition, and human values, which worships the dollar and the stock-market ticker. Even beyond New York itself, the spirit of Americans became infected with the ideology of those who sit in the towers around Wall Street and believe that everything can be bought like stocks and bonds—be it fur coats, Congressmen, South American politicians, love, divorce, the editorial policy of a newspaper, opera stars, guns and tanks, art, or public opinion.

THE WORLD TAKES ITS CUE

The skyscraper mentality would be of no particular concern to the world outside the United States were it not for the fact that only a short while ago the skyscraper mind dominated almost the entire world and still radiates all over America and the nations allied to it. Revolutions have been bought and paid for in the towers of Manhattan, and so have wars.

In fact, New York with its skyscraper mentality is ideally suited to be the capital of American propaganda. Housed in its gigantic buildings is one of the biggest and most powerful propaganda machines in the world.

In Rockefeller Center's seventy-story "Radio City," the National Broadcasting Company of America has forty studios where most of the "nation-wide hookup programs" originate which are rebroadcast all over the States. Other leading broadcasting companies with nation-wide chains also have their offices and studios in New York's skyscraper districts.

Most of America's leading magazines, with a combined circulation of sixty-

seven million, are published in New York's skyscrapers, as are seventy-five per cent of all the books of the United States. The publishing and printing business, with 2,500 commercial printing plants, forms New York's second largest manufacturing industry. Concentrated in the skyscraper area of midtown Manhattan, there is a 1.5-billion-dollar advertising business with nearly two hundred advertising firms, molding the habits and tastes of the American public.

New York, the newspaperman's Mecca, has an overwhelming influence on the press of the entire continent through news services such as the AP and UP as well as through its papers, which are sold all over the United States and are used as reference material by publicists and scholars even in the most remote parts of the country.

The New York Times is published in a skyscraper, so is the *Daily News* (with a weekday edition of two million copies of 64 pages each and a Sunday edition of 3.5 million), and so are the magazines *Time* and *Life*—to mention only a few of the best-known instruments of the skyscraper mind. Their influence is enormous, for American propaganda—whether intended for business or for war—is efficient and scientifically designed, incorporating the latest principles of technology, psychology, and mass production. It shows all the characteristics of New York and its skyscrapers. And these giant edifices spew it forth in huge quantities, all over the city, all over America, and even far beyond America's frontiers. They spew forth hate and distortion, misrepresentation and half-truths, "human interest" stories and "objective" reports, day and night without interruption.

THE SKYSCRAPERS' SHADOW

A skyscraper may not have a soul, but it certainly has a personality. Yes, a building of sixty or eighty floors, of functional design, constructed of steel, concrete, and glass, fitted with standardized steel windows, does have personality. Its personality is not that of a human being; it is that of a monster. There is something sinister and menacing about skyscrapers, particularly during winter nights when one can hardly see the upper floors, which disappear into the dark misty sky.

One day while I was sitting at my desk, an explosion shook the building. It sounded as if all eighteen elevators in our building had fallen to the ground simultaneously. Dust, dirt, and small objects were blown up to the floors above. The air pressure was terrific. People ran around feverishly. Police arrived to cordon off a section of the skyscraper. A few people had been injured.

What had happened? Someone had bombed the German Economic Organization, located one floor below our office. The time bomb had been slipped in unnoticed, wrapped in a newspaper which was delivered every day at that hour.

The two years since we had looked down on King George passing through the canyon between the skyscrapers had brought great changes. Nobody laughed any more at the idea of American intervention in European or Asiatic affairs. Of course, the huge majority of the people who were living in the shadow of the skyscrapers did not want war, but everyone felt that it was coming nearer and nearer. People still hoped, but they no longer felt sure. It was like the dark ominous shadow of a monster.

